The Greek myths

Thebes

By James Davidson
Foreword by Darian Leader

No 3 in a series of 6

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Thebes

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Series editor Charlie English
Assistant editor Philip Oltermann
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Illustrations by John Spencer

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Foreword
Darian Leader

Few Greek myths have permeated the popular culture as deeply as the story of Oedipus. We might not be familiar with the whole saga of the house of Labdacus, but we all know that Oedipus killed his father and slept with his mother. These ghastly facts can certainly make us shiver, but can the tragedy of Oedipus do more than simply horrify us?

For Sigmund Freud, the power of Sophocles' drama could be explained as an effect of our unconscious desire. The story disturbs us so much because we all harbour an Oedipus within themselves: we all wish to supplant our fathers and have exclusive possession of mothers. These currents of our childhood are repressed in the unconscious, but they continue to shape us. As Freud pointed out, many of the great works of literature, from Shakespeare to Dostoevsky, deal with these motifs in one form or another.

But the Oedipus myth illuminates much more than our unconscious wishes. It shares with psychoanalysis the themes of agency and motivation. Oedipus's story is that of a man whose life is shaped by destiny. It is prophesied that he will kill his father and wed his mother and whatever his conscious will or volition, he cannot escape this fate.

Oedipus is thus a tragedy of self-knowledge. He plays out a script that has been written before his birth without realising what he is doing. In this sense, his story is all our stories. We all create false narratives to explain our behaviour, just as we all unknowingly play out elements of the lives of our parents and ancestors. We think we act for certain reasons, when in fact we are often acting out scripts that may predate our birth, as Freud and later generations of analysts showed.

Over the centuries, writers and philosophers have tried to free Oedipus from the unpleasant straitjacket of fate. Pausanias claimed that Oedipus was not the son of Jocasta but of a previous wife of Laius, and Voltaire argued that Sophocles didn't say that Oedipus himself killed Laius, leaving ambiguous the author of the crime. The absurdity of many of these rewrites reinforces one of

the central tenets of the myth: that our fate is unavoidable.

The story of Oedipus tells us that we are not masters in our own house. But there is also another, darker side to the story, one that psychoanalysis has had less to say about. What, after all, has set the terrible chain of events in motion? Oedipus, as the son of Laius, has been cursed because of an act of transgression of his father. Laius had raped Chrysippus, the son of Pelops. So, before Oedipus's crime lies the sin of the father. A son's destruction of a parent echoes a parent's act of violence towards a child.

The myth shows us how the transgressions or tragedies of a previous generation will return to haunt those that follow. And in our modern age of forgetting, this is a lesson that we cannot ignore. It is often said today that we live in postoedipal times: the Oedipal story no longer has any relevance since we are all familiar with the famous Freudian wishes. They have become banal and no longer shock. But the rewriting of the myth time and time again in cinema, art and literature – and the power of these works to move us – belies this view. Its ubiquity, in fact, suggests another interpretation.

Oedipus, perhaps, is less a source of true anxiety than a defence against it, stitching together as it does so many disturbing, ungraspable aspects of our experience into a coherent story. The enigma of our origins, sexual desire and violence are all bound together meaningfully. Children move through the Oedipal phase not simply when this story is imposed on them but when they actively create it for themselves, turning an obliging father, for example, into a forbidding tyrant. They use the myth to order their reality. That's why, for Freud, the Oedipus complex has a certain pacifying effect.

In its Sophoclean version, this story has another special relevance for our time. The antique lesson of tragedy can be summarised in the formula *ta mathemata pathemata* – things learned are things suffered. In today's culture where information has become a commodity, we are supposed to have instant access to knowledge. And self-knowledge is taken to be a right rather than the result of a long and painful effort.

Yet the drama of Oedipus shows us that the movement from ignorance to a knowledge about our destiny and our origins involves an arduous and even unspeakable journey. How different this is from the contemporary cult of the self. Gone is the idea that we must pay a high price for knowing something about ourselves, as Oedipus did.

Darian Leader is a psychologist and a founder member of the Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research, London

Cadmus and the dragon's teeth

Of all the cities of Greece none is more famous for myths than Boeotian Thebes. Thebes's beginnings, however, lie far from that region, in Phoenician Lebanon, where one day Europa, daughter of King Agenor, was picking flowers in a field by a beach.

As Europa squatted on the grass making posies, she suddenly saw a bull in front of her, white as snow with horns polished like semi-precious stones. The bull was gentle and nuzzled her and ate the flowers she held out, and lay down on the soft grass alongside her, as tame as can be. She made a chain of flowers, placed them on his horns, and climbed on his broad back, riding him like a pony round a paddock. But as soon as he felt her weight, the gambolling bull began to run, galloping straight out to sea. Europa feared she would drown, but the bull swam on across the Mediterranean to arrive in Crete.

There, at last in a secluded place, the bull revealed himself as Zeus. He had disguised himself to escape the notice of jealous Hera, and he lay with Europa and she bore to him Minos, who would become king of Crete, and Rhadamanthys, who was famously just. Zeus named the continent of Europe in honour of this daughter of Asia as if it had been discovered anew.

Back in Phoenicia, Agenor sent his sons in all directions to find his beloved daughter. One of these, Cadmus, went west, sailing from Lebanon to Greece. He put in at Delphi to consult Apollo's oracle. "Your search for your sister is at an end," the oracle told him. "For she is Zeus's mistress and needs no rescuing. But he bids you stay in Greece and found a city, which will become famous for all time." "And where shall I found it?" asked Cadmus. "Where lies the cow with two moons," said the oracle. As the Phoenicians left the temple they saw a cow on the road in front of them, black as night. It turned and walked away and they saw that it had two great silvery circles on its back, like full moons in the night sky. They followed it for days as it climbed rocky passes and ambled over river meadows, unhurried and tireless, never resting. Finally it came to Boeotia, which means "oxen-land", and stood upon a rocky hill, looking out over the surrounding fields. There finally it lay down and the Phoenicians knew their long journey was at an end.

On that very spot they built an altar to the city goddess Athena, whom they called Onga in their own tongue, and made preparations to sacrifice the cow to her in order to win her blessing for the foundation of the city, which they named Thebes. Cadmus went to fetch water for the ritual from a nearby spring, but the spring belonged to a dragon, the offspring of Ares, god of savagery and war, and it refused Cadmus's request. So Cadmus killed the dragon and took the water anyway and made the sacrifice.

Ares advised him to take the dragon's teeth and to sow them on the plains. Thus would Thebes become mighty in war. Cadmus did so, but when the field was ploughed and sown, it produced a great crop of warriors, sons of the teeth of the dragon, offspring of Ares, bristling with swords and spears, full of warrior spirit, ready to fight and kill. Athena, grateful for the Thebans' sacrifice, handed Cadmus a stone. "With this you expect me to fight an army?" asked Cadmus. Athena nodded. So he threw the stone into the middle of the ranks of the sown men as they were still shaking the soil from their hair. It hit one of them on the head. His blood up, he let out a great war cry. "We are under attack, my brothers," he shouted. "Let battle commence!" So saying he charged at his neighbour, thinking he was his attacker. And he in turn called out to his brothers: "Earth-born sons of savage Ares, or should I call you Ares's gentle daughters? Join me in the fight or go and join the womenfolk." And so the sown men fought each other, and soaked the field in blood. All day long

they fought until but five were left standing, the bravest of all, now utterly exhausted. Cadmus invited them to lay down their swords and join with him in building his city so that its population would be a mixture of foreigner Phoenicians and native sons of the soil.

Ares was embarrassed at how easily Cadmus had defeated his mighty warriors, who had shown bravery and aggression but no intelligence or discipline. So he made peace with Cadmus and gave him the hand of his own daughter, Harmonia, in marriage, for her mother was lovely Aphrodite, who knows how to bring people together in harmonious union. With Harmonia Cadmus enjoyed the happiest of marriages and together they had four daughters: Ino, Agave, Semele and fair Autonoë.

The grandsons of Cadmus

Actaeon

Fair Autonoë married Aristaeus, he who first discovered how to get honey from bees. Together they had a son, Actaeon. Actaeon loved to hunt, chasing deer with his faithful hounds. He never returned without his quarry, or at least what was left when his dogs had finished with it. Often he would make gifts of game, not to his doting mother but to her young sister Semele, for Actaeon was in love with his aunt and even proposed marriage. Zeus was not happy about that, for reasons which will become clearer, and decided to punish him.

One day as he was hunting on the slopes of Cithaeron far from home, Actaeon saw a stag, the noblest-looking creature he had ever seen. "Here at last is a worthy quarry for you, my faithful hounds. So, up and at him, and happy hunting." The dogs raced off, tails wagging, pausing only to put their noses to the ground.

The stag was an elusive quarry and took Actaeon into places he had never been before, although he thought he knew the mountain well. Actaeon stretched out on a rock to rest a while, letting the dogs run ahead of him, knowing they would come back to him as

soon as they heard their master's voice hallooing. From his rock he heard the sound of running water, and decided to quench his thirst before he returned to the chase. As he got closer he noticed the sound of girls laughing and sporting. He wondered if he had found the place where nymphs bathe. Furtively he approached, and as he peeked unseen through the branches of the conifers, he saw a whole crowd of naked ladies, more beautiful than he had ever imagined, swimming in the cooling stream and splashing each other.

One of them stood out from the rest in beauty and stature, a maiden with a most unmaidenly figure, voluptuous and curvaceous. Actaeon shed his hunting gear and emerged from his hiding place, anxious to dive in. The nymphs rushed to shield their mistress from the mortal's gaze. "Come, don't be frightened of me. I am one man and wonderfully outnumbered. If this was the fabled bath of Artemis upon which I was intruding, then I would be fearful. But your mistress does not look like a virgin to me, more like a servant of Aphrodite." "Put some clothes on," said Artemis. "The sight of a man is repulsive to me. For I am indeed Artemis." So saying she reached for the deerskin she had doffed to bathe and threw it at him: "Now return to your hounds. Happy hunting!"

Actaeon wrapped the deerskin around his naked body and ran, calling his hounds and thanking Zeus for a lucky escape. Away from the glade, his dogs ran up to greet him licking his toes and wagging their tails. But then they started biting him and growling. Actaeon thought it was the scent of Artemis's deerskin that was confusing them and tried to remove it. He couldn't. The deerskin was stuck fast to his own skin. He felt a growth on his forehead, and reached up to discover he was sprouting antlers. He tried to climb a tree, but found his arms had turned to deer legs. He was trapped inside the body of a stag. So, as his own dogs nipped and bit and finally tore into him, Actaeon knew at last what it was like to be the hunted rather than a hunter.

The birth of Dionysus

In truth, Semele had found her nephew Actaeon's proposal no more than amusing. For Semele had a secret lover. He looked like a man, but claimed to be Zeus himself, and Semele believed him. She was flattered by his attentions and lay with him and conceived a child. But when her sisters discovered her condition, they berated her. "Foolish girl, so easily seduced by someone pretending to be the king

of gods and men. Now you will pay the price for your vanity, driven from Cadmus's halls in shame, a mother without a husband."

Now Semele herself began to doubt and wondered if she had been tricked by some ordinary mortal. When next "Zeus" paid a visit she asked of him a favour. "I gave myself to you without resisting. Will you not now give me something in return?" Her lover nodded his head. "I ask only this," said Semele, "that for once you appear to me as Zeus, if Zeus you really are." "And I must refuse you only this," said her lover, "for you are a mortal and if I shed my human form you will be burned to a crisp." Now Semele began to wail. "Deceiver of a silly girl, my sisters were right to denounce you. I know you cannot be Zeus, for you promised to give me something in return and the real Zeus would never refuse that to which he had assented." Zeus, for it really was him, groaned, his anger mixed with pity and regret, for what Semele had said was quite correct. "So be it, Semele," he said, and there was a mighty crash of thunder. Cadmus ran into the courtyard and saw Semele's bedroom filled with flashes of lightning, blasting the roof off and exploding through the walls and windows. Zeus rescued his unborn son from the charred remains of his mother and stitched him into his thigh.

And so in time Dionysus was born again from the loins of Zeus himself. Hence men call him "twice-born" and they honour him and worship him in drunken revels and drama festivals, for he gave the gift of wine which alone allows men to forget all the trials and tribulations that came out of the box of Pandora.

Heracles

Thebes became a great and powerful city, attracting many immigrants. One day there arrived a man from Argos, Amphitryon, and his lovely wife Alcmene. Zeus desired her, although she was married, and, more problematically, faithful to her husband. But Zeus enlisted the help of Apate, goddess of delusion, and came to Alcmene's bed disguised as her husband Amphitryon. She unwittingly welcomed him and enjoyed with him the delights of love for a night which lasted three days, as Zeus had forbidden the sun god Helios to rise until he had finished. Soon after Zeus had left, Amphitryon himself arrived and he too united in love with Alcmene. She was puzzled by her husband's remarkable endurance but nevertheless welcomed his renewed attentions.

Nine months later Alcmene gave birth to twins, Iphicles and Heracles, and soon came to realise that one of them was special. For one morning when she entered the nursery to feed them she was horrified to find a pair of snakes slithering into the cradle. Iphicles started screaming, but Heracles took one in each of his baby hands and strangled them. The snakes had been sent by Hera. Of all the sons Zeus had fathered on other women, Hera hated Heracles most of all, for the seed of Zeus flowed in his veins most copiously. But Zeus protected Heracles and he grew into the strongest of men and the greatest of all Greek heroes. So Hera devised another plan.

Many men thrust their daughters at Heracles knowing he would sire powerful grandsons, but he chose Megara, daughter of Creon, king of Thebes, as his wife. They loved each other and were happy together and had three sons. Now Hera paid a visit to Apate, the goddess of delusion: "Daughter of night, with your assistance Zeus shattered two sets of marriage vows at once: him, a husband, sleeping with another man's wife. Now I require a favour of you as compensation for these offences to my domain." And Apate, most reluctantly, agreed.

Heracles was sharpening his knife in preparation for making a sacrifice to Zeus. Three lambs were led up to the altar, while his wife and children stood by. "Come here little lambs," said Heracles. His children, thinking he was referring to them, came running to help their father in the sacrifice. One by one, Heracles slit their throats. Then he turned to the lambs: "Come my children. Let me show you how to divide up the portions for the gods, in commemoration of Prometheus's ruse." Megara's screams brought him back to reality and Heracles saw what he had done.

The Labours of Heracles

Heracles was deported to Argos, and as penance for his dreadful deed, he was bound to the service of King Eurystheus, his cousin. And the king was allowed to set Heracles not one but 12 tasks, both dangerous and humiliating, and he spent many long hours doing research and making his list of labours, while Hera helped by releasing into the world some products of her private menagerie. She had reared a terrible lion with a skin impervious to all metal blades. It caused havoc throughout the region of Argos known as the Argolid, until Heracles wrestled it to the ground at Nemea and choked it. He used its own claws to skin it and wore it forever as protection.

Hera now unleashed a venomous snake, the Hydra, and set it in the marshes of Lerna; this creature was not impervious to metal but had powers of regeneration, so that when Heracles cut off her head, two grew back and he was faced with an ever more fearsome monster. Heracles sent to Thebes for his nephew Iolaus. When next Heracles cut off a head, Iolaus seared the stump, so no more heads grew.

His third task was to fetch the gold-horned hind of Artemis, swiftest of deer. He chased it on foot all over Europe for a whole year. Then, at last, Artemis allowed him to take it. Eurystheus was running out

of inspiration, for Heracles had dealt with all the miraculous beasts of the region. He sent out inquiries further afield and meanwhile humiliated Heracles by setting more menial tasks: to fetch a Cretan bull and the Erymanthian boar, to chase away the birds that plagued the Stymphalian lake. "These are deeds worthy only of a cowherd, a swineherd or a scarecrow," said Heracles. So Eurystheus set him the most humiliating task of all, to clean out the stables of Augeas, providing him with baskets to gather the manure. But Heracles turned even this task into an exploit, by diverting an entire river to wash the stables clean.

Next Eurystheus sent Heracles to Thrace to fetch the mares fed on human flesh by their owner, Diomedes. Heracles fed Diomedes himself to his mares; he tasted so horrible they reverted to being vegetarian. Then Heracles was sent to Amazonia to fetch the belt of the queen of the Amazons, a ferocious race of women warriors. He fought them and captured the queen's sister, demanding the belt as her ransom.

Now Eurystheus, advised by Hera, sent Heracles to the extremes. First, to steal the cattle of Medusa's grandson Geryon, a giant with three bodies and three heads, who dwelt in the land of the setting sun, a place very hard to get to, where everything, including the cattle, was red. To reach it, Heracles went in the opposite direction and travelled to the furthest point east, to where Helios the sun god finishes his nightly journey on the encircling stream of Ocean and steps into his chariot to ride across the sky. For Helios never travels underground, unwilling to bring sunshine to Hades' dismal realm. Instead, each night he travels around the horizon, from west to east, concealing his light in a deep cup. At dawn he disembarks and his cup continues its circular journey without him, now from east to west, picking him up again at sundown.

Heracles quickly climbed aboard the vessel as soon as Helios disembarked and by the end of the day reached the land of the setting sun. He found Geryon's cattle and started driving the cattle to Spain. But three-bodied Geryon stood in his way and opened three mouths in unison. "Heracles! Your father's grandfather, Perseus, came here once and killed my grandmother Medusa, after tricking my great-aunts the Graeae, frail old women with but one eye between them. But though monstrous they may have seemed, though monstrous I may seem, we have never monstered anyone. This herd is mine. What right do you have to take it?"

"No right, but no choice either," said Heracles. "So get out of my way or you will discover an answer to a question that has often perplexed you: whether you are mortal or immortal." Geryon struck Heracles, three-fold, with spear and sword and arrows. Each blow bounced off him, unable to pierce the skin of the Nemean lion. Then Heracles took a phial of the poison he had milked from the Hydra's fangs, and dipped his arrows in it, noting how ironic it was that his labours had made him more formidable. One of Geryon's bodies went down, and lolled at his side like a wilting flower. Then Heracles dispatched another, so he looked like a half-peeled banana. "I am two-thirds dead, Heracles, child-murderer, thief, but look, I still come at you," said Geryon, speaking his last words.

Heracles deposited the cattle in Argos, having herded them through Italy, France and Spain. Immediately Eurystheus sent him away again, setting him two truly impossible final tasks, which no mortal man could hope to accomplish, for he had been advised by Hera: to fetch back Cerberus, the three-headed hound of hell from Hades, but first to bring him the Golden Apples of the Hesperides. For the first time, Zeus feared Heracles would not succeed. These ancient apples were a wedding gift to Hera from Gaia, her grandmother, in a garden that no mortal could enter, protected by the mightiest dragon-snake of them all, quite unkillable. But Zeus sent wise Athena to help him.

Heracles avoided the garden and paid a visit to Atlas instead. He is the Titan who holds the sky up to stop it falling on men's heads. Heracles stood on the top of the nearest mountain and offered to relieve Atlas of his burden for a short time if he would fetch the apples of the Hesperides. Atlas was only too pleased to take a break from his long task. He lowered the sky on to Heracles' bowed neck and fetched the apples without difficulty, reaching down from a stupendous height so the dragon did not notice. Heracles prepared to return the sky but Atlas refused to take it. "A 'short time' for me means a couple of centuries, for I have held the sky for aeons. I will be back, but in about 200 years." "Of course," said Heracles, "but will you agree to hold it just one second while I get a cushion?" Atlas knew how uncomfortable sky-shouldering could be and took up his burden once more for a moment. Heracles ran off. "Come back here. We had an agreement," shouted the Titan. "Indeed we did," said Heracles.

Then Heracles went to the underworld to fetch back Cerberus, but Cerberus was nowhere to be found. Since the ghosts of the Nemean

Lion, and Hydra and Geryon, had preceded Heracles, all the denizens of the underworld were terrified of him and fled at his approach. Heracles marched into Hades' palace and saw the fearsome hound cowering behind his master's throne. Heracles asked for the dog to be handed over to him. Hades agreed on condition that he overpower him without weapons and to bring him back immediately. Heracles wrestled the dog and carried him to Eurystheus, who was so terrified of the beast that he hid in a storage jar: "Take him back. Take him back," he whimpered. "Let this be the last of your labours."

Deianeira

Finally Heracles was cleansed of the crime of infanticide and decided to seek a second wife. First he went to Oechalia in Euboea to seek the hand of Iole. But her father, Eurytus, remembered the fate of Megara's children and refused his daughter's hand, calling Heracles a child-murderer. Heracles went away but swore his undying enmity, promising Eurytus that one day he would be back to sack his proud, walled city.

Heracles found a more amenable match in Deianeira, a princess of Calydon. Deianeira was his kind of woman. A sister of the great hero Meleager, she drove a chariot and was expert in the arts of war. But she already had a suitor, Achelous, greatest of the river gods of Greece. Three times Achelous came to ask for her hand in marriage. First he arrived in the form of a bull. The second time he arrived as a shimmering serpent. Deianeira did not fall for him on either occasion. Then he came to her in his true form: a bull with a human face and a single horn like a unicorn, with a long shaggy beard that streamed with clear spring water. Deianeira prayed to the gods that she would never have to welcome such a creature into her bed. But Achelous was a powerful god and it would be unwise to disappoint him.

When Heracles arrived and also sought Deianeira's hand, her father was overjoyed and willingly accepted his suit. But Achelous challenged his rival to a wrestling match. Heracles had not wrestled an immortal god before and Achelous was able to change his shape. The bull-man became a writhing serpent-man with slippery scales and a long saw-toothed dorsal fin. Heracles could not get a grip on him and even when he did manage to get him in an arm-lock, Achelous refused to yield, knowing that Heracles could never kill him, although he could kill Heracles, eventually. And Deianeira

looked on in mounting trepidation. But Heracles refused to give up. He grabbed Achelous by his single horn and using all his strength he broke it off. Achelous cried out in pain and returned to his normal form, a man-faced bull with just a stump where his horn had been. Only then did he yield. He allowed Heracles to take Deianeira, saying he would no longer stand in his way and pleading for his horn back.

Heracles married Deianeira, but at the wedding banquet, the waiter stumbled and spilled wine on him. Heracles cuffed him over the head, but he had been drinking and was so strong that he smashed the poor boy's brains in. Once again he was exiled for accidental manslaughter. He was given refuge in Trachis, but as the exiles made their way there, they had to cross a river. A centaur called Nessos, with the body of a horse and the torso of a man, offered to ferry his wife to the other side, while Heracles waded through the current. As soon as Deianeira was on his back, Nessos galloped off with her and even attempted to rape her. Deianeira wondered what it was about her that monstrous creatures found so attractive. As Nessos fondled her in mounting excitement, Heracles heard her cries for help. He took one of his arrows, dipped it in the phial of poison he had milked from the Hydra, and shot him. The centaur collapsed on top of her. He felt the poison chilling his blood and knew he would be dead within minutes.

"Deianeira, forgive me," Nessos said. 'I do not know what came over me. I will share with you a secret to atone for and to explain my outrageous conduct. I foresee that one day you will be older and Heracles will find you less attractive and will turn his eyes to other women and will take another wife and abandon you." Deianeira looked horrified. "But do not worry. I have a remedy. My centaur's blood has special powers. It contains all my love for you. If you collect it and keep it secret then whenever Heracles' eyes wander, apply it to his skin as a salve and he will find you as attractive as I now find you." With that, his eyes closed. And Deianeira collected the blood which drained from his flanks and soaked her dress, and put it in a phial and kept it in a safe place. The centaur felt her collect his blood and died smiling.

Although Deianeira kept a close eye on him, Heracles only had eyes for her, and they enjoyed a happy marriage and had three fine sons who would be the ancestors of the Dorian race. Deianeira forgot how to drive a chariot and all about the arts of war and learned how

to weave and rear children. But Heracles was restless. He had not forgotten his feud with Eurytus and one day he set off to Euboea to sack the city of Oechalia. Eurytus was a formidable opponent. He was a grandson of Apollo and a master of the bow, nearly as skilled with it as Heracles, although he lacked the advantage of the Hydra's venom in which Heracles dipped his arrows. So eventually Heracles succeeded in sacking the city. He killed Eurytus, he killed his sons and finally got his hands on the fair Iole, whom he turned into his slave-mistress.

Deianeira, meanwhile, received bulletins from the battlefront with increasing anxiety. She learned of the reason for the feud, of Heracles' wooing of Iole, of her father Eurytus's refusal, of Heracles' oath to return and sack the city. She feared her husband's victory, and when victory was announced longed for news that Iole had been killed in the massacre alongside her father and her brothers. She was most disappointed to learn that Iole had been captured. Now Heracles was returning in triumph and Deianeira was filled with trepidation, wondering if the time had come when Heracles would abandon her for another.

When Heracles sent all the booty on ahead, including the captured prisoners, Deianeira rushed out to inspect them. When she saw Iole she was panic-stricken, for she was one of the great beauties of the age. "I hear your father turned my husband down, when once he came to ask for your hand in marriage," said Deianeira. "Mistress this is true," said Iole. "And now he has sacked a city to get you into his hands?" "It would seem so, mistress," said Iole. "And doubtless he could not wait to share your bed." 'I was not in a position, mistress, to refuse him." Deianeira let out a great cry and Iole feared for her life. "And now I suppose he will marry you, and a slave girl will take my place." Iole bowed her head and said nothing. "Your silence speaks volumes. But I have a remedy that will ensure that this marriage never takes place."

She returned to her quarters and took out the phial of the centaur Nessos's blood that would make Heracles love her again. She also took out a splendid robe, dark red in colour. She smeared the blood all over its inner lining. Then she sent it to Heracles with a note: "Heracles, if you still love me wear this robe of my own weaving when you return to the palace in triumph." And Heracles got ready to return home and to celebrate his victory, hoping to spend another

night with Iole, whose beauty he was already missing. But he still loved his wife and did not want to disappoint her so he put on the robe she had sent him.

The centaur's blood was not pure centaur's blood, as the centaur knew only too well. It may have contained his love for Deianeira, but it had also been mixed with poison from the arrow which had killed him, the arrow dipped in the deadly venom of the Hydra. So as soon as the garment touched his skin, Heracles felt his flesh burn. He tried to pull the garment off but it was stuck fast, and when he tried to tear it off with all his legendary strength, he pulled off chunks of his own corroded muscle, the meat falling off his bones, as if from a leg of long-cooked lamb. He had never felt such agony and for the first time knew what it must have been like for his victims. He bellowed like a mad bull. He killed the man who had brought him the garment and swore to kill Deianeira as well, but then the pain became so great that he forgot all thoughts of killing and just begged someone, anyone, to send him quickly to his death.

No man dared to come near him, so he ordered his followers to build a funeral pyre on Mount Oeta. This they duly did, and Heracles lay down on it, though he was still alive, and ordered it lit, and as the flames began to lick his skin, he breathed a sigh of relief, for in comparison with his burning skin, the flames felt like cooling breezes.

Heracles' many exploits had convinced the gods that the seed of Zeus did indeed flow copiously in his veins and that he was more than human. So when the flames died down, there were no human remains to be found amid the pile of ashes. Meanwhile, on Olympus the gods welcomed a new member of the pantheon. Even Hera finally relented, so long as this was the last of Zeus's sons to be offered the privilege. And so men honour Heracles as the mightiest of all Greek heroes, and sacrifice to him as a god also.

Oedipus

The line of Cadmus passed to Laius, his great-grandson, who took as his queen Jocasta. But now it looked as if the line was at an end, for an oracle foretold that if Laius had a son, he would kill his own father and marry his mother. So Laius and Jocasta were resigned to having no heir. Despite their best efforts, Jocasta bore Laius a son, presenting Laius with a dilemma: he did not dare to kill the child, remembering what happened to Heracles when he killed his children. Instead he ordered a retainer to take the child away and to leave it to die on the mountains, to starve or fall prey to the beasts, leaving Laius with no blood on his hands. For nearly 20 years Laius reigned happily, but one day while the king was travelling in his chariot he came to a crossroads and found a man blocking the way: "Make way, brigand," said Laius. The man refused. Laius got out his horsewhip and whipped him. The man grabbed the whip and pulled him from his chariot. There was a fight and Laius was killed.

Jocasta wept bitter tears, lamenting not only the death of her husband but also the death, many years ago, of her son. For it was now clear that they had mistaken the oracle's true meaning and she had allowed her only child to be killed for no reason. While Thebes mourned, news came to mitigate their sadness with rejoicing. For many years a monster called Sphinx – a woman with the body of a lion and wings, who had landed on Mount Phikion – had been plaguing the city,

picking off the sons of Thebes. She demanded of all who passed the answer to a riddle: "What has four legs in the morning, two at noon, three at dusk, and fastest moves on fewest?" When they could not answer, she ate them. Now a man called Oedipus, son of the king of Corinth, had found the answer: Man, who crawls on all fours in the morning of his life and leans on a stick in his dotage, but is at his fastest when in his prime. The Sphinx promptly threw herself off the cliff, with nothing left to live for, now everyone knew the answer to her riddle. The Thebans chose Oedipus as their new king. He even married Laius's widow, Jocasta. She was old enough to be his mother, but youthful. Indeed she soon bore him sons and daughters.

For a while Thebes was happy and prosperous under its clever new king, but then cattle started dying, the crops suffered a blight and deaths of children rose. Delphi revealed that the gods were angry because Laius's murderer had gone unpunished. So Oedipus set out to find the murderer, first asking Jocasta all the details of what had happened. She told him. Oedipus went white, for he remembered that fight at the crossroads: the murdering brigand was he. As he took it all in, an old messenger arrived from Corinth with news that his father was dead. Oedipus was sorry but also pleased that he had escaped his destiny. For it had been prophesied that he would kill his father. That was the reason he had left Corinth in the first place. "Oh no," said the messenger, "the king was not your real father. I took you to the king myself and he adopted you, for he had no sons of his own." "Who is my real father?" asked Oedipus. "I don't know," said the messenger. "Ask the man I got you from! Ask him!' And he pointed to a palace servant, one of Laius's old retainers. "Don't ask me!" said the old retainer. "Ask her!" And he pointed to Jocasta, who was going through a gamut of emotions.

She now realised she had found her long-lost son and embraced the old retainer. "For years I was wracked with guilt thinking of my first born, cold and alone on the mountain. But you were kind and couldn't let him die." "No!" said the old retainer, hanging his head as tears rolled down his wrinkled cheeks. Then she turned to Oedipus. "For years you have been running from an oracle. Run no more. You have already killed your father and married your mother, for I am your mother, the mother of your children." She then entered the palace and hanged herself, while Oedipus reached for the brooch that clasped his cloak. "How blind I have been," he cried. "How blind! How blind!" And he stabbed himself in the eyes.